

ByInvitation

Thinking about the future now

How society goes about it can make a big difference to how well Singapore fares in the years ahead

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In the past few years, the Government has restructured the economy, made significant policy shifts in manpower, healthcare, education, housing and transport, and embarked on ambitious plans to make Singapore a smart nation. In the same period, many Singaporeans have expressed their hopes for the kind of society they want Singapore to be.

The common theme across these and other recent significant developments is the focus on the future of Singapore and its people.

That has always been a hallmark of the Singapore Government. But the recent and still ongoing wide and deep engagement involving diverse segments of the public to examine the future is unprecedented.

As discussions continue, it is useful to think more clearly about futures thinking. To succeed in the efforts to “futurise” Singapore, we need to understand the psychology of future orientation and the different ways to think about the future.

FUTURE ORIENTATION

When we adopt a future orientation, we think about what the future could be (how things might turn out), should be (how we want things to turn out) and would be (how to make things happen). These thoughts then guide our current attitudes and behaviours. So we delay gratification, stop procrastinating, start planning and make investments with the view to reap later what we sow now.

Future orientation requires thinking beyond immediate concerns, needs and wants. It is about thinking ahead to the future consequences of present behaviours.

It often involves the decision – or at least the recognition – to give up current rewards or not give in to short-term expediency, so that long-term interests are not sacrificed. It is an acceptance of short-term pain for long-term gain. Studies have shown that people who adopt a future orientation are more likely to cope well with changes, make constructive decisions and enjoy positive outcomes in the long term. They are more likely to experience good health, engage in pro-social behaviours, do well financially, and perform better in school and at work. They are also less likely to exhibit impulsive, aggressive or conforming behaviours that lead to regret and other negative outcomes.

TO PREVENT OR PROMOTE

People may use two approaches to think about the future and make decisions. One approach, called “prevention focus”, strives to avoid negative outcomes. The other, called “promotion focus”, strives to achieve positive outcomes.

The two approaches are accompanied by different sets of thoughts, emotions and behaviours.

Prevention focus comes about because we learnt that there are duties and obligations that we must or should fulfil to prevent adverse events or outcomes. When we have not fulfilled these duties and obligations, we feel agitated, anxious and guilty.

When we are prevention-focused, our thoughts are dominated by how things can turn out badly and what to put in place to prevent losing the safety, security or stability that we now possess. There is a feeling of responsibility, vigilance and sensitivity to the dangers of complacency. The behaviours that follow tend to be risk-averse.

The prevention-focused approach highlights limitations of new ways of thinking and doing things that are different from the status quo, as well as the unintended negative consequences.

On the other hand, promotion focus comes about because we learnt that there are achievements and aspirations that bring rewards such as approval or other recognitions. When these desired positive outcomes do not occur, we feel disappointed and discouraged.

When we are promotion-focused, we think about how things can become better and the different ways to pursue advancements and accomplishment of the desired outcome. The dominant feelings are hope and eagerness. The behaviours that follow tend to be risk-taking.

The promotion-focused approach highlights how a positive consequence may broaden and multiply.

Prevention focus is critical when there are real dangers to look out for. But an over-reliance on prevention creates a “better don’t try” general attitude that leads to errors of omission. Promotion focus is critical for innovation and high achievements. But errors of commission occur when we rely too much on promotion which creates a “just do it” general attitude.

Research has shown that people differ in their general tendencies towards adopting a prevention or promotion focus. However, research has also shown that it is possible to activate the relevant focus by making salient the negative consequences to avoid or the positive consequences to pursue.

When approaching the future, whether prevention or promotion is more appropriate will depend on the issues and situation at hand. For organisations, prevention



focus is critical for crisis management and business continuity plans. Promotion focus is necessary for productivity, innovation and competitive advantage.

At the societal level, prevention focus has served Singapore well in the way we handled financial and health crises, security threats and racial and religious harmony issues. Promotion focus was evident in the way we made progress in educational achievements, urban solutions and technological applications.

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

When we think and talk about the future, it is important to understand prevention focus and promotion focus. If we are aware of how these two approaches operate, we become less susceptible to their errors and we can capitalise on their strengths. This allows us to

discern when to apply more of one approach or adopt an appropriate balance of the two approaches.

To effectively use prevention- and promotion-focused approaches, I suggest we incorporate six positive features in our futures thinking:

- **Be adaptive.** Technology, population composition, ways of doing work and way of life will continue to change rapidly. The uncertainty associated with these changes creates ill-defined problems and novel demands. What works in the past or present may not work in the future. Ability and willingness to cope with changes, learning orientation to acquire new skills, self-efficacy to overcome obstacles and resilience to bounce back after failure will determine who becomes adaptive or maladaptive.

- **Be strategic.** It is tempting to focus on technical issues, identify concrete problems and go after the low-hanging fruit because these tend to deliver results quickly. But in futures thinking, we need to operate at a higher level that addresses issues strategically. Clarify and seek consensus on the purpose of investing resources. Identify emerging issues such as social class divides and social mobility. Apply constructs that unite people and unify solutions such as social capital and the Singapore spirit.

- **Be principled.** Adaptability is not value-free. It needs to be guided by principles. If flexibility is unprincipled and decisions are changed to go along with the flow regardless of their efficacy and sustainability, that is not adaptability but populism or hypocrisy.

Changes in well-established decisions and positions in the name of futures thinking need to be justified by our shared values of integrity, fairness and social harmony and the guiding principles of accountability, rule of law and people-centricity.

- **Be integrative.** With limited resources and diversity of needs, planning for the future is often faced with conflicting demands. When tensions occur, recognise that not all decisions involve zero-sum trade-offs. For example, ageing is not only a liability but also an asset and an adaptation process. We should integrate social expenditure that addresses needs of an ageing population and social investment for a healthier and more productive elderly population, both economically and socially.

- **Be relevant.** Understand what is relevant to people when discussing the future of Singapore. Know their concerns and aspirations, but also anticipate how people’s needs and wants may change over time. People’s attitudes and actions are influenced by their daily experiences and the comparisons they make with their immediate past or their near future. From the people’s perspective, these comparisons are more relevant than images of a distant future or aggregate statistics such as economic indices or Singapore’s position in a world ranking on liveability.

- **Be evidence-based.** Thinking about the future involves speculation but also sense making. Sense making leads to interpretation, recommendations and decisions, and all these should be evidence-based. Minimise the influence from personal beliefs or subjective preferences. Use evidence and analysis triangulated from multiple disciplines to infer what could happen in the future and guide action plans to respond to the future or create it.

The future is often hard to predict and almost always uncertain. But whatever the future will be, we are more likely to thrive in it if we have thought about plausible futures coherently.

Whether it is an individual, an organisation, or a society, one coherent way to guide our thinking about the future is to incorporate the “Aspire” features – adaptive, strategic, principled, integrative, relevant and evidence-based. If we are rigorous and clear when thinking about our future, we can be more realistically confident that our aspirations and efforts will translate to reality.

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